In the preceding chapters we have been concerned with technological and political intensification in relation to population growth. We now turn briefly to what might be called social intensification to differentiate it from the political intensification discussed by Netting. Owing to the nature of the ethnographic method (on which data on social organization largely depend) it is particularly difficult to document examples of the effects of population growth on social organization. What Lee offers us here is an analysis of the comparative dynamics of small and large groups and the centrifugal and centripetal forces that make for each among the !Kung Bushmen.

The secular growth in world population has been accompanied by a parallel tendency for men to group themselves together in larger and larger communities. The effect of living in larger communities has been to stimulate a more intensive social life. When the size of the local group grows beyond the scale where everyone knows everyone else well, new modes of behavior and new forms of social organization must crystallize in order to regularize the added complexity. Such processes of group formation, especially in historical perspective, are still poorly understood. It may be useful to examine the phenomenon in a relatively simple context—among the hunting and gathering !Kung Bushmen of the Republic of Botswana.

Intensification of social life is not associated solely with population growth. Societies of hunter-gatherers exhibit this process cyclically during the course of an annual round. Here I describe what happens when more hunters gather in one place, delineate those factors that bring people together and those that keep people apart, and examine the shift of these factors in the light of recent political developments. Finally, the relative
weight of ecological and social forces in the intensification of Bushman social life will be evaluated.

**Traditional Society: The Public Life and the Private Life**

In a now classic paper *Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés eskimos* (1906), Mauss and Beuchat discussed the various groupings formed by the Central Eskimo at different times of the year. They distinguished two phases in the annual cycle of the Eskimo, which they labeled the "public life" and the "private life." The public life takes place in the winter sealing camps; up to 150 people get together in ten or twenty igloos for the purpose of hunting seals through breathing holes in the offshore ice. It is at this time of year that the winter ceremonials and shamanistic performances take place. In the spring the private life phase begins, when the large winter camp splits up and the people disperse into smaller domestic groups of one to several families, who move inland for caribou hunting and for fishing. This phase lasts through the summer until the next freeze-up, when the large winter camps are re-formed.

This division of the year into two phases, a period of concentration and a period of dispersion, appears to be characteristic of not only the Central Eskimo but most of the world's hunter-gatherers as well (Lee and DeVore, 1968).

Among the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, availability of water was the key seasonal variable. During the winter dry season (May–August) all the Bushmen were concentrated at one of several permanent water points in groups of as many as 150 to 200 people. In the spring (September–November) the rains created temporary pools of water all over the desert, and the people went out to live at them. During the main rains (December–April) the people were dispersed in groups varying in size from 7 to 50 people, who ranged widely as the major food plants came into season. After a brief autumn, when the summer waters had dried up, the Bushmen again converged on the permanent water holes to form the large winter camps.

Like the Eskimo and most other hunter-gatherers, the nature of the ecology demanded flexibility in Bushman living arrangements. In drought years the public life phase was extended because water was available at only the few most reliable water holes. During years of higher rainfall,
the minor water points might hold water through the winter and into the next rainy season. Thus people could live there throughout the year and remain more widely dispersed than in years of drought, thereby extending the private life phase.

What Brought People Together

Although the winter camp, public life phase was dictated partly by the ecology, living together in large groups had many social benefits for the Bushmen. This was the period of the year when social life was more intense, a period of large-scale trance dancing and curing, initiations, trading, story telling, and marriage brokering.

The Bushman men's initiation camps or choma were held in the winter every four or five years. The choma brought together the largest aggregations of Bushmen. The reason for this is that at least seven boys of the correct age were needed to make it worthwhile to run the elaborate six-week-long initiation program, and one had to call in a large number of local groups to get together enough boys between the ages of fifteen and twenty. The families of the boys camped together and provided food for the initiation camp throughout the six-week period. When very large groups of twenty or more boys were initiated together, the numbers in the adjacent camps must have been well over 200.

Even in the years when choma camps were not formed, winter camps of 100 to 200 were common. The trance-dance curing ceremonies (Lee 1967, 1968a) brought together medicine men from far and wide. The curing medicine was thought to be especially effective when many performers entered a trance at the same dance. Since the big trance dances went on round-the-clock for twelve to thirty-six hours, subsistence had to be organized to provide support for the singers, dancers, and trance performers. This was difficult to do unless there were fifty or more adults in a camp, since to be effective the trance dance had to have at least fifteen to twenty adults participating at any one time.

A third activity of the public life phase was hxaro trading. Hxaro is the term applied by the Bushmen to their peculiar institution of long-distance exchange networks. Goods traveled for hundreds of miles across the Kalahari from one hxaro partner to another. Any individual would have dozens of partners, many of whom he or she would see less than once a
year. Fulfilling trading commitments and putting new goods into circulation were major activities at all Bushmen camps but especially the large ones that brought together people who saw each other infrequently. The peculiarity of Bushman *hxaro* trading was the inordinate length of time separating the two halves of a transaction. Individual A gave B a trade item—such as a spear, arrow, or ostrich eggshell-bead necklace—and A and B would part. Months or years later they would come together again, and B would give A an item in return.

_Hxaro_ trading is a traditional form of exchange among the Bushmen, but it has become particularly important as an avenue through which novel items of Bantu and European manufacture have been disseminated into the interior of the Kalahari.

Marriage brokering was another of the activities bringing together large groups of Bushmen. Because of the small size of local groups and the frequent disparities in sex ratios, parents had to look far afield in arranging a spouse for their son or daughter. It was rare that an individual could find a spouse from within the home group or adjacent groups. More frequently marriages brought together people from twenty-five to fifty miles apart (H. Harpending, personal communication). The large winter camps gave the local families the opportunity of casting a wider net in seeking a spouse.

All of these activities—religious, medical, economic, and marital—brought Bushmen together and contributed to the intensity of social life. In general, the winter dry season camp was a period of higher social velocity, during which more time was spent interacting with larger numbers of people. But life in large groups was not an unmixed blessing, and there were many occasions when water and food resources were abundant, but large groupings failed to materialize. The question can now be raised: Given the obvious advantages of larger grouping, why didn’t the Bushmen spend more of their time together in one place?

**What Kept People Apart**

The major disadvantage of intense social life in larger groups is the increased frequency of conflict. Arguments and fights take place in Bushman camps of all sizes and at all seasons, but the larger camps seem particularly plagued with disputes. For example, at _/ai_/, a water hole with
a large resident population (100 to 150), serious disputes broke out about once every two weeks during 1968–1969. The comparable rate for water holes like Dobe and Mahopa, with resident populations averaging between 40 and 60, was three or four times a year. In the past, the *choma* initiation camps often failed because of disputes on procedural matters. The big camps would split up, and the participants would disperse into smaller groupings in local areas.

Keeping very large groups together requires special efforts from individuals. They must maintain higher levels of cooperation and coordination of hunting and gathering activities than would be necessary in smaller domestic groupings. For this reason the largest aggregations of Bushmen and of other hunters such as the Pygmies (*Turnbull* 1965; 1968) were inherently unstable; fights were likely to break out and lead to the breakup of the group.

The largest groupings that the Bushmen could muster thus had an inherent dilemma. The people sought the stimulation of a more intense social life, but there was always the danger of serious conflict. The Bushmen annual round was structured to allow both kinds of social life—the intensity of the public life, with its inherent dangers, and the domestic tranquillity of smaller groupings in the private life.

The coalescing and splitting of hunter-gatherer local groups have often been considered as an adjustment to changing ecological conditions, and there is a great deal of validity to this view (*Steward* 1936; 1955). Given the annual and regional variability in water and food supply, it is highly adaptive for Bushmen to move frequently and to maintain flexibility in order to make the most effective use of their resources. But within the framework imposed by the ecology, conflict also plays a role in the rearrangement of groups. If people have a good enough reason for staying together—such as the performance of a ritual—they can do so but only if they are prepared to work harder at it. Bushman groups of over 100 people can be sustained for months but only at the cost of an increasingly high input of subsistence effort per capita. When conflicts break out and poison the atmosphere of the camp, the members may find it preferable to split up and seek greener pastures.

The combination of the factors of seasonal ecology and the disruptive effects of conflict worked out so that in the traditional hunting and gathering society an average of approximately three months out of the year...
was spent in the larger groups of the public life and the other nine months were spent in the private life.

**Contemporary Society: Stabilizing the Public Life**

Now I shall consider how this state of affairs has been affected by recent contact of the Bushmen with the outside world. About forty-five years ago, in the mid-1920s, the Bantu-speaking Herero pastoralists entered the Dobe area and set up their cattle posts at the large permanent water holes. The Bushmen built camps near the Herero and asked them for milk, tobacco, and trade goods. Gradually a pattern was established in which the Bushmen visited the cattle posts on a regular basis while continuing to depend on wild vegetable foods and game for the major part of their subsistence. As the herds of the Herero prospered, some Bushman families settled with the Herero to provide extra labor as cowboys and milkmaids. Their families acted as a conduit for funneling surplus milk to more isolated groups so that all Bushmen participated at least indirectly in the contact economy for periods varying from a few weeks each year to most of the year.

By the late 1960s for example, at the /ai/ai water hole (where I spent fourteen months in 1968-1969) there were 150 Bushmen resident in seven adjacent camps, along with 70 Hereros and over 500 head of cattle. This large semipermanent aggregation of Bushmen puzzled me. How could so many Bushmen stay together in one place for so long? Then I realized that what had happened was that the Bushmen of /ai/ai had achieved a permanent public life situation. Instead of spending nine months of the year dispersed and three months of the year together, they had reversed the ratio. Many Bushmen lived at /ai/ai for nine months in the winter and spring and dispersed only for a short period at the height of the fresh food season in late summer and early fall.

Two essential factors enabled the Bushmen to achieve this happy state of affairs. First their overall subsistence has been assisted by an input of Herero milk, meat, and agricultural produce. Wild vegetable food and game still provide over half of the total subsistence in calories, but these hunting and collecting activities still leave plenty of time free for socializing, resting, and dancing.
Without the Herero food, the /ai/ai aggregation would not be possible (or possible only at the expense of unprecedented subsistence effort by the Bushmen). But an additional element is necessary—namely the legal umbrella provided by the Hereros to maintain order among such a large number of feisty Bushmen.

Arguments are a frequent occurrence at /ai/ai, but whenever a dispute comes to blows or shows other signs of becoming nasty (as it did about once every two weeks during my fieldwork at /ai/ai), someone runs for the Herero. At this point one or more Hereros intervene to separate the combatants and mediate the dispute. Formerly, the Bushmen did their serious fighting with spears and poisoned arrows. The Bushmen have been deterred from doing this since the mid-1950s, when several Bushmen were brought to Maun, the tribal capital, to stand trial for homicides resulting from arrow fights. Thus the Bushmen can maintain an intensity of social life over long periods that would not have been possible under the traditional hunting and gathering conditions. Under the old order real conflict and the threat of conflict tended to work against the Bushmen's desire for a more intense social life. It is the presence of the Hereros as mediators, backed up by the legal sanctions of the Batawana Tribal Authority and, until 1966, by the British Colonial administration, that provides the umbrella that enables 150 Bushmen to live together in relative harmony for the greater part of the year (see Netting, Chapter 9, this volume).

This example illustrates nicely how economic-demographic factors on the one hand and sociological factors on the other dovetail in the analysis of the implications of population growth. If the !Kung Bushmen were more tightly organized, they could have maintained larger aggregations for longer periods. Instead, their relatively brief periods of intense social life were surrounded by much longer periods of relative isolation in small domestic groupings. The evidence of large gatherings being sustained in the face of quite unfavorable food situations demonstrated to me that the Bushmen could live in larger groups if they wanted to. Put another way, their mean group size and intensity of land utilization were measurably lower than the levels that could be supported by the resources. The gap between what could be supported and what was observed as being supported can be explained by the Bushmen's avoidance of conflict situations.
A *conflict* explanation should not be considered to be in some way opposed to an *economic* explanation of Bushman social arrangements. In fact, conflict may best be considered as a part of ecological explanation—that is, fear of conflict acts as a spacing mechanism to keep hunters and gatherers widely dispersed and thus to stabilize their population density well below the level that could be supported by available resources.